

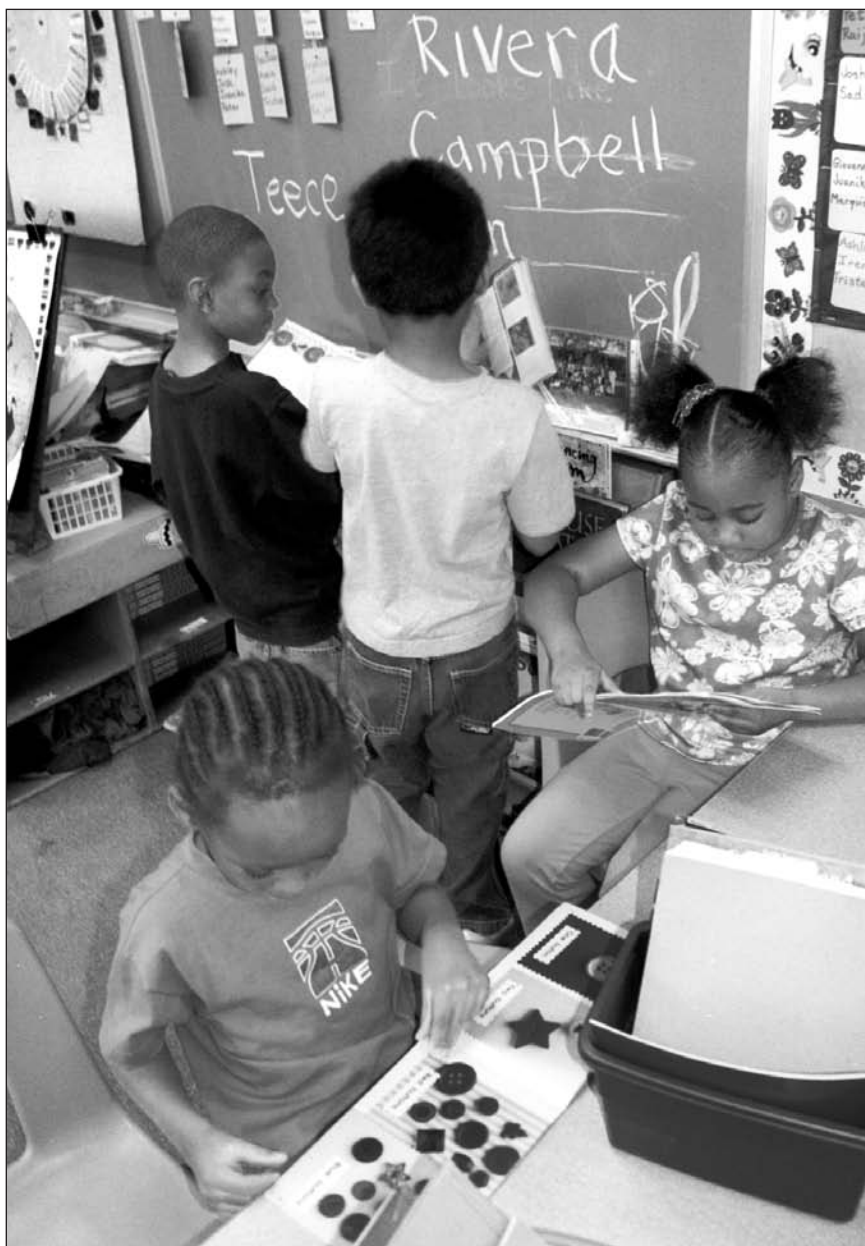
“Sounding Out”: A Pervasive Cultural Model of Reading

Catherine Compton-Lilly

Interviews of parents and children indicate that they buy into the societal belief that reading is “sounding out,” but what is it that they really do as readers?

441

“Sounding Out”



When I spoke with ten of my urban first-grade students about solving unknown words and becoming better readers, many of them mentioned “sounding out words” and/or “sounding out letters”:

Tiffany: *By sounding the letter[s] out.*

Christy: *Sound it out.*

Peter: *I sound it out.*

Marvin: *Sound out the words.*

Three years later, I interviewed nine out of these same ten students about reading. They were still describing “sounding out”:

Jermaine: *They [teachers] make me sound the words out.*

Tiffany: *I think they [good readers in the class] sound it out.*

Marvin: *She [the teacher] helps me sound out the words.*

Alisa: *Like, I need help with a word and she [Alisa’s mother] be like, “Sound it out.”*

“SOUNDING OUT” AS A CULTURAL MODEL

My students’ pervasive use of “sounding out” to describe their reading processes fascinated me.

It seemed that no matter what I asked or how I phrased my questions, children talked about "sounding out." While other reading strategies such as rereading and making sure text makes sense were mentioned by children, "sounding out" was always prominent. Likewise, the parents of my students also encouraged their children to "sound out" as they read.

In this article, I suggest that "sounding out" is a pervasive "cultural model" for reading subscribed to by my students, their parents, and the larger society. James Gee (1999) defines a cultural model as a "taken for granted 'theory'" (p. 59). He describes cultural models as, "images or storylines or descriptions of simplified worlds in which prototypical events unfold" (p. 59). A cultural model of reading encompasses the taken-for-granted theories that people hold about reading processes and practices. As Gee (1999) explains:

... when cultural models are brought to our attention, we can often acknowledge that they are really simplifications about the world, simplifications that leave out many complexities. But then, all theories, even theories in science, are simplifications for some purposes and not others. (p. 59)

Gee explains that cultural models, because they involve simplifications of complex phenomena, can be misleading. "We conventionally take these 'prototypical' tapes to be the real world, or act as if they were, overlooking many of the complexities in the world in order to get on with the business of social action and interaction" (p. 60).

The cultural model of "sounding out" privileges phonetic decoding over other decoding strategies, particularly those that involve the meanings of texts and the structures

of language. "Sounding out" draws our attention to reading accuracy through a reliance on letter-sound associations. Marie Clay (2001) explains that adults generally report "sounding out" problematic words: "This leads them to the conclusion that reading is a process of breaking down in which the sound sequence is articulated by the reader" (p. 92). Clay states that, after two years of schooling, children also report "sounding out words."

In his classic article, *Learning to Think about Reading*, J. F. Reid (1966) noted that nine out of the twelve five-year-old students who were asked mid-year how they knew what a book said described or demonstrated "some sort of independent action, usually 'sounding

It seemed that no matter what I asked or how I phrased my questions, children talked about "sounding out."

out'" (pp. 58–59). By the end of his research project, Reid reports that all twelve children referred to the sounds of the letters when asked the same question. More recently, Reutzel and Sabey (1996) report that sounding out, followed by asking someone what the word was, were children's most commonly reported word-solving strategies. It appears that the prevalence of sounding out has a significant history and is not unique to my students.

Frank Smith (2003) describes "Just Sound Out" as a "Just So Story" that is widely accepted by "newspaper columnists, politicians, and publishers of educational tests and instructional materials" (p. 256). According to Smith, this pervasive

belief connotes that "sounding out can be reduced to small steps, prepackaged in instructional materials, dealt out one bit at a time, and tested and monitored every step of the way" (p. 258). He explains that this faith in sounding out words

... can only be undermined by deep and critical thought, which is not evident in most casual conversations, media discussions, political pronouncements, and educational planning. People whose minds are already made up do not need to think about something that is obvious. (pp. 256–257)

Gee (1999) agrees, stating that it is difficult to recognize the persuasiveness of cultural models and to understand how they operate in our world.

Thus, it is not coincidental that when politicians and business executives collaborate to legislate guidelines and mandates for reading instruction that "sounding out" is prominent. The summary of the National Reading Panel Report asserts that systematic synthetic phonic approaches benefit learning-disabled students, low-achieving students who are not classified as learning disabled, and children from low socioeconomic backgrounds. These "synthetic phonics approaches" are described as teaching students to "link an individual letter or letter combination with its appropriate sound and then blend the sounds to form words" (National Reading Panel, 2000, p. 7). This description of synthetic phonics is identical to the ways the children and parents in this study describe sounding out words. Similarly, reports posted on the federal No Child Left Behind Web site present this same information. However, none of the research referenced by either the National Reading Panel or No Child Left Behind legislation involves re-

searchers actually documenting the strategies children use as they read. While the cultural model of reading as "sounding out words" infiltrates homes, schools, and even federal legislation, the children in this study very rarely used this strategy; in fact, they used a range of strategies to solve words while reading. In this article, I explore how children describe the process of "sounding out words" and then analyze the extent to which my students actually "sound out" based on the two definitions of "sounding out" described by my students. Second, I explore the role "sounding out" plays in parents' experiences with reading and how they apply their understanding of "sounding out words" to instructional interactions with their own children. Third, I present the tendency for children to cite "sounding out" as one type of evidence of being a good reader and present additional strategies that children report using to solve unknown words. Finally, I briefly explore how older children and adults use the phrase "pronouncing out words" and examine how this phrase relates to "sounding out words."

TEACHER RESEARCHER CONTEXT

For several years, I taught in a large urban elementary school that served primarily African American and Puerto Rican children. The school, Rosa Parks Elementary School, is located in a high poverty area of a mid-sized city in the northeastern United States. I taught in a first-grade classroom; the children were heterogeneously grouped in my classroom and across the school. All names of people and places in this article are pseudonyms.

This article presents data collected during a longitudinal teacher research project. During the first phase of the project, I randomly se-

lected 10 families from my first-grade class and conducted a series of interviews with both students and their parents regarding their concepts about reading and the role reading plays in their lives. The original interview questions were loosely based on the "Reading Interview" developed by Carolyn Burke (1987) (see Figure 1); the interviews occurred over a school year. In addition to the interviews, I collected audiotaped recordings of class discussions and guided reading groups as well as field notes and student portfolios. Interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed in full, and analyzed using a grounded theory model in which pertinent themes were identified and explored to create a contextualized model of reading. Three major themes were identified and explored: 1) the role of reading in participants' lives; 2) participants' reading identities; and 3) relationships that form around reading (Compton-Lilly, 2003). In

addition, this research explored the deficit assumptions about children and families that often operate within urban schools (Compton-Lilly, 2004).

In the second phase of the study, I returned to interview these same children and parents when the children were in grades four and five. I was able to locate 9 out of the 10 original families. Because I planned to follow these children through high school, the one family that I could not locate was replaced by the family of a student (Meg) in my current first-grade classroom who had an older sister (Angela) the same age as my former students. I currently teach in a school that is located one block away from Rosa Parks Elementary School. Henry Ford Elementary School is a magnet school that serves children from across the district. In addition to the interviews, I collected student writing samples and conducted running records with my former students

Questions for Parents:*

Do you like to read?
Tell me what it was like when you learned to read?
Do you help your child with reading? How do you help him/her?
What do you do when your child comes to a difficult word while reading?
Do you think that it is important that your child learns to read?
How is learning to read going for your child?
Is there anything that might be affecting your child's learning to read?
In terms of reading, what are your expectations for your child's future?
Have your child's experiences with learning to read affected your feelings about reading?

Questions for Students:

Tell me what kinds of things you read? What else?
Do you like to read?
Do you think that you are a good reader?
Is learning to read important? Why?
How is learning to read going for you?
When you are reading and come to something you don't know, what do you do?
How do kids learn to read?
What things make learning to read hard?

*Many of these questions are adapted from the Burke Reading Interview (Burke, 1987).

Figure 1. Sampling of questions from the interview sessions

(Beaver, 1997; Ekwall and Shanker, 1993). The data were first analyzed to construct a case study for each family that would contextualize the reading lives of participants within their daily lives and experiences. More recently, I have looked across cases and across the longitudinal study to identify compelling issues that promise to extend our understandings about reading.

As a trained Reading Recovery Teacher, the instruction in my first-grade classroom emphasizes the utilization of three cueing systems (meaning, structure, and visual). Building on the work of Marie Clay (1991), Fountas and Pinnell (1996) define these cueing systems as follows:

Meaning (Semantics): accessing the story background, illustrations, and meaning in a sentence to solve unknown words.

Structure: accessing often unconscious knowledge of the grammatical patterns used in spoken language and books to solve unknown words.

Visual (Graphophonic): using the visual features of words and letters along with the ways words sound when they are spoken to solve unknown words.

When encouraging children to attend to visual information in text, I prompt children to "use the first letter" or ask the children whether their attempts "look like" the word in the printed text. The following is a typical interaction from a guided reading group session that involves children reading unfamiliar text with support from the teacher:

Leron: *[Reading from his book] A bike takes me to the /p/, /k/.*

CL: *Yeah, you saw the "p" and the "k," didn't you. Where is she? Her bike takes her to the /p/ . . .*

Leron: *park*

CL: *[I point to the picture.] Is she in the park?*

Leron: *[nods]*

CL: *Yeah, check the picture. It will help.*

When I work with children who are learning to read, I consciously avoid directing children to "sound out words." I find that when beginning readers attempt to "sound out words" they often produce each sound in isolation rather than blending the sounds together. My conscious avoidance of the phrase "sound it out" makes my students' continual references to "sounding

I find that when beginning readers attempt to "sound out words" they often produce each sound in isolation rather than blending the sounds together.

out" even more intriguing. Reutzel and Sabey (1996) note that despite differences in teachers' theoretical orientations, students in all classrooms, ranging from subskill/decoding classrooms to whole language classrooms, report extensively that they "sound out words."

CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDINGS OF "SOUNDING OUT"

As I analyzed the data from the initial phase of the study, I began to wonder what my students meant by the phrase "sounding out." When I returned to interview them three years later, I made a point to speak further with the children about "sounding out" and had several children and parents demonstrate the process of "sounding out" a word. I was surprised to find that they offered me two different, but related, definitions for "sounding out": 1) sounding out words sequentially letter-by-letter; and 2)

finding two or more chunks within the words that they recognize and putting these chunks together.

Prior to this research, I had always thought of "sounding out" in accordance with the children's first definition. This definition involves vocalizing each sound of a word letter-by-letter in sequence until the entire word is decoded. As Tiffany explains, "I look at the word. I start with the first letter and then from that I sound it out and then I get the word."

In the following example, Bradford, who is now in a fourth-grade special education class, uses the phrase "pronounce it out." As I will explain later in this article, "pronounce it

out" is a phrase that children sometimes use in grades 4 and 5 to refer to "sounding out."

CL: *Now Bradford, when you are reading and you come to something you don't know like a hard word, what do you do?*

Bradford: *I pronounce it out.*

CL: *Mmm-hmm. Show me how you would pronounce out a word.*

Bradford: *[If] it's [the word is] "when," I go like /w/ then I'll put a "h" /h/, then /w/, /h/. Then I put an "e" on and an "n" on and then I'll say "when."*

Bradford, clearly demonstrates an understanding of the process of "sounding out words" as involving the left to right sequencing of letter sounds. It is interesting that in this example, Bradford vocalizes the "h" separate from the "w." While in this

particular word the aspirated /h/ probably does not interfere significantly with his "sounding out" of this word, this tendency to vocalize every letter in a word becomes problematic when words have silent letters and complicated letter-sound relationships.

During an interview at her home, Meg demonstrated a second definition of sounding out words. Meg was a first grader in my class at the time of the second study; I asked her to show me how she sounds out a word. I wrote the word "trip" on a piece of paper and asked Meg to "sound it out."

Meg: /tr/-up.

CL: Say it again.

Meg: I can't!

[Both the researcher and Meg's mother respond; we are talking at the same time and encouraging her: "Yeah, you can do it." "Try it." and "Do it again."]

Meg: /Tr/-up

CL: Trip [I provide the correct word]

Meg: Trip? [spoken as a question and then laughs]

Although Meg is not successful in sounding this word out, she demonstrates the basic process of "sounding out words" as putting word parts together. As Alisa explains, "You can split them [the words] up." David explained the process when I asked him, "What does your teacher do when you get stuck on a word?"

David: *She doesn't just tell me what the word is. She tell[s] me to sound it out and to go well like the vowels. And go like the first word, the first word or two words, like if it's the word is like "without."*

CL: Mmm-hmm.

David: *Um, you go "with," you go "with." "With" is a whole word.*

CL: Right.

David: 'Cause "with" and the word "out." too.

CL: So you use the two parts.

David: *Yeah I, I use, I sound it out and, I sound it out like, I sound it out and I, if a long (unclear word) word come into my head on the book like "reading" I go "read"—"ding" and then that's how I sound out my words.*

Thus, my students described "sounding out" as a letter-by-letter process and as entailing the use of known parts of words.

SOUNDING OUT WHILE READING TEXTS

While children spoke extensively about "sounding out," it is important to note that their constant verbalization of the strategy did not reflect their actual reading behaviors. Analysis of running records that I completed with the eight children for whom I have complete data from grades one and four/five revealed the strategies my students used when they came to problematic words in text.

Both definitions of "sounding out words" rely on the visual analysis of words. I did not attempt to identify every strategy that the children used to decode print. Rather, I focused specifically on the children's use of visual information (i.e., use of first letter, visual similarity, sounding out sequential letters, and sounding out word parts). In many cases, it was obvious that children were using additional sources of information (i.e., structure or meaning) along with their visual analysis. However, for this article, I limited my analysis to the types of visual

analysis used by the children and only coded attempts as meaning- or structure-based if the children did not appear to use visual analysis in their attempts. Thus the results of this analysis cannot be used to compare children's use of visual cues to their use of meaning or structure cues. I believe that the children were often using meaning and structure cues in conjunction with visual cueing sources; however, the coding of miscues presented here does not capture their simultaneous use of multiple cueing systems.

The children's attempts fell into the categories listed in Figure 2. In categorizing the data, I have coded as "sounding out" those responses that coincide with the children's two definitions of "sounding out": sounding out using sequential letters and sounding out using word parts.

Figure 3 identifies how students in this study actually attempted to solve words. Although the children often talk about "sounding out words," they are actually utilizing a much broader range of strategies when they read.

"SOUNDING OUT" WITHIN FAMILIES

If children use other strategies besides "sounding out words," why do they talk about "sounding out"? My research suggests that "sounding out" is a cultural model (Gee, 1999) that extends beyond teachers and schools. It is a simplified image of the reading process that infiltrates thinking and talking about reading.

During interviews, several of my students' parents described their own teachers as instructing them to "sound out" words. Ms. Webster shared her memories of first grade: "We went straight to the word. The teacher would say, 'OK, now we are going to sound it out,' and then she

First Letter: The child appears to have either based his/her attempt on the first letter of the target word or vocalized the first letter, consonant digraph, or consonant blend for a word and then attempted the word (i.e., /w/ *windows* for *windows*; my for *mom*).

Meaning: The child's attempt reflected attention to the meaning of the story, which may include the text's illustrations (i.e., *sleeping* for *resting*).

Structure Miscue: The child produced the wrong form of the correct word (i.e., *ate* for *eat*; *helps* for *help*).

Visual Similarity: The child's attempts show strong visual similarity

to the target word that extends beyond the initial letter; no apparent attempt is made to sound through the word (i.e., *big* for *bag*).

Asking: The child asked for help in solving an unknown word.

Sounding Out Sequential Letters: The child used the letters and their sounds in his/her attempts to read sequentially through the word from beginning to ending (/w/-/a/-/roo/-/m/ for *warm*).

Sounding Out Word Parts: The child used letter patterns and/or word parts to attempt a word (*cave-erns* for *caverns*).

Figure 2. Categories of children's miscues

would just sound it out with us. That's how we learned to read." Other parents regret that their teachers did not require them to "sound out" words more often.

CL: *If you were going to learn to read again, what would you like it to be like? If someone was teaching you all over, [if] you were a little kid again.*

Ms. Johnson: *I would like them to teach me better how to sound out a word. Oh gosh, I thought I would die with that. [I remember thinking] "I can't do it."*

My own students tell me that their parents have them "sound out" words when they are reading at home.

CL: *And how does she [your mom] help you?*

Strategies Used	First Grade		Fourth/Fifth Grade	
	Number of Miscues	Percent	Number of Miscues	Percent
First Letter	35	59%	20	17%
Meaning	49	22%	21	18%
Structure Miscue	14	6%	13	11%
Visual Similarity	21	9%	58	50%
Asking	4	2%	0	0%
Sounding Out Sequential Letters	2	1%	0	0%
Sounding Out Word Parts	3	1%	4	4%
Total:	128	100%	116	100%

Figure 3. Strategies used on running records

Alisa: *She, she—like, I need help with a word and she be like, "Sound it out." And I'll be—and sometimes I'll write to see how you spell it. And she be like, "Sound it out," or something like that.*

Ms. Rodriguez confirms Alisa's report:

When she's reading along, she comes to me and if she don't come to me she goes to her brothers and we tell her the same thing. "Sound it out!" [Ms. Rodriguez laughs] . . . We help her sound it out . . . and then she be like, "Ok, ok, ok, wait a minute, wait a minute." And then we keep going until she gets it because we don't want to tell her the word because . . . she's not going to get it if you just tell her. Let her do it on her own.

Although parents talk to children about sounding out words, they often access other strategies when helping their child. At one of our interviews, Ms. Webster demonstrates helping Jasmine with a book that she brought home from school:

Jasmine: *[reading] I can see the flowers. I can see the bee [the word was dragonfly].*

Ms. Webster: *No, sound it out. What is that? [Points to the picture of a dragonfly on the page].*

Jasmine: *Dragonfly.*

What is particularly interesting in this example is that Ms. Webster tells Jasmine to "sound out" the word and then immediately directs her attention to the picture to help her successfully solve the word. A cultural model of reading that includes "sounding out" captures an image of reading, but that model does not necessarily describe what people actually do when they read or what they do to help others.

The second definition of "sounding out" that the children in this study described involved splitting words into parts. Parents also described helping children to "sound out" words in this way.

Ms. Hudson: *I tell him to keep, you know, sounding it out. Take, divide it up. Break it up.*

CL: *Can you give me an example?*

Ms. Hudson: *Ok, like, let me see, like "coloring." [Ms. Hudson picks up a coloring book that is on the table]. I have him do it like that. [Ms. Hudson demonstrates by using her fingers to mask three parts of the word coloring: co-lor-ing] Ok? And then, you know, 'til he sound it out [she runs her finger under the word as she says "sound it out"].*

Some parents report that their children get frustrated when they try to get them to "sound out" words. Ms. Johnson explains, "A lot of the time he gets frustrated when he can't figure out a word. You know and I will tell him, I say, 'You know the sounds to each and every letter. You have to put the sounds together.' " Ms. Webster has a similar difficulty with her older daughter:

It's like, "Mommy help!" And it's like [I say] "Help what?" "What's this word?" "Sound it out." "I don't want to. What's the word?" (Ms. Webster laughs). It's really hard [when they don't want to sound the words out].

Ms. Webster reports that at times these interactions became so frustrating that she would "have to walk away." "Sounding out" can be frustrating for both parents and children, perhaps because parents

are unknowingly asking children to use a strategy that children rarely use when actually solving words.

One very interesting finding from the data was that while students spoke about their teachers and parents having them "sound out" words, and parents spoke about their teachers having them "sound out" words, Ms. Johnson was the only parent who mentioned "sounding out" in connection with her own mother:

It was very hard for me [to learn to read]. I, I think I learned to read mostly by the pictures. I'd look at the pictures and kinda figured out the words. My mom sat down with me every night and read to me, and she would sound out the words for me, and that is pretty much how I learned.

Notably, the "sounding out" that Ms. Johnson describes is done by the mother rather than the child. When parents spoke about their own parents and learning to read, they spoke about bedtime stories, parents arranging time to read, and trips to the library but not "sounding out words." Perhaps it is the temporal distance and the nostalgic quality of memories that focus parents on their relationships and experiences rather than reading strategies when they recall reading with their parents.

GOOD READERS AND "SOUNDING OUT"

During the interviews, I had children identify peers from their classrooms who they felt were good readers. When asked how these good readers solved unknown words, many students again mentioned "sounding out."

CL: *What does she do that makes you know she [Lecara] is a good reader?*

Marvin: *She sounds out the words.*

CL: *What else does she do?*

Marvin: *She [pauses], I forgot.*

Other children mention "sounding out" as evidence of their own reading proficiency. Bradford speaks about his reading when he is in fourth grade.

Bradford: *The math I'm doing good and the reading I'm going good.*

CL: *Math and reading. Great. How do you know that you're doing better in reading?*

Bradford: *Because, my, my words, the words that I couldn't read, then I sound them out and read them.*

CL: *And how do you solve them when you're reading?*

Bradford: *Sound them out, go by saying, saying the first letter then go to the end.*

When David was in first grade, he reported that the reason some children have trouble with reading was "because they don't sound them [the words] out."

While children often talk about "sounding out words," even in first grade, my students recognize other things that readers do.

Alisa: *Go back and try again.*

Jermaine: *He think in his brain.*

Bradford: *They ask their friend can you help.*

Javon: *. . . try the first letter or the last letter.*

Christy: *Spell [the word].*

Jasmine: *Look at the pictures, look at the words, look at whatever even more.*

Marvin: *Make sure it makes sense.*

The fourth graders in particular noted other things that good readers did. David described Tashita as a good reader:

David: *She, she makes it [the story] funny.*

CL: *Mm-hmm, how does she do that?*

David: *When they say nasty things, she makes a nasty face.*

CL: *[laughs]*

David: *And when they make, and when and when it's funny she makes a funny face.*

Javon makes a similar comment about a good reader in his class, "[When she read] it kind of felt like emotions in there." By fourth and fifth grade, my former students also identify the dictionary as a resource for solving difficult words.

PRONOUNCING WORDS AND SOUNDING OUT

When I returned to interview my former students when they were in fourth and fifth grade, a new word had appeared in their vocabularies in relation to reading. They now spoke about "pronouncing" words as well as "sounding out."

CL: *Do you remember anything that, um, helped you learn to read? Or any people?*

Angela: *All I remember that helped me to read was pronoun-, sounding it out.*

Just as Bradford said, "I pronounce it out" and then demonstrated a process that appeared identical to "sounding out" a word, Angela illustrates the interchangeability of these words as she starts to say one word and then chooses the other.

Likewise, Ms. Johnson defines the word "pronouncing" in a way that is similar to "sounding out:"

Well, pronouncing a word is, um, if David can't get all his sounds intact he cannot pronounce the word. If he can't put all the sounds together, he won't get the word.

However, "pronouncing" has an additional dimension, which, unlike "sounding out," is used extensively when the parents in this study talk about their own reading. Ms. Mason teaches preschool at a local community center.

I find myself with a lot of words [that] I cannot pronounce right. Sometimes the three year old[s] be saying, "Ms. Mason, you be saying it wrong." "Ok, tell me the right way to say it." So sometimes I pick up from the kids, too.

Ms. Mason attributes her difficulty with pronouncing words to her southern upbringing. As a speaker of a southern, African American dialect, Ms. Mason is aware that she often pronounces words differently. Thus, pronouncing words also relates to saying words the way they are spoken in "Standard English." Ms. Hudson shares Ms. Mason's southern, African American linguistic roots; she refers to pronouncing words correctly as a "little problem":

Ms. Hudson: *See, because right now I have a, a little problem pronouncing the words but then I keep at it until I get it right.*

CL: *And what do you do to help yourself when you get stuck like that?*

Ms. Hudson: *I just keep on saying it in my mind until it sound[s] right in my mind and then I know I got it right. . . . I be knowing what it is but I just can't get it out right.*

Although Ms. Webster is of European American descent, the linguistic patterns that she brings from her small rural community may con-

tribute to her difficulties with pronouncing words. She talks about the words she confronts in her adult business class.

Now there's some words in my books from school, you look at these words and it's like, "How do you pronounce it?" And there could be several different ways to pronounce it. And then if you say it wrong, the teacher will correct you. Then it makes you look, I mean being my age [29 years old], [it] makes you look stupid.

"Pronouncing" words is often viewed as a problem by parents. It appears that "sounding out" as a cultural model for reading intersects with and then metamorphoses into a different cultural model for adults. This cultural model encompasses both reading and spoken language and privileges "standard" forms of English. While some of the parents identify a southern accent or their New York City accent as contributing to their difficulties with pronunciation, others simply see it as a personal failure. As Mr. Sherwood explains, "Sometimes I get caught up on a word [when I'm reading] uh, um, I can't pronounce. And it affects you, it affects you . . . You can't say it right. That's my problem, I just don't, I can't say that word." While this concern with pronouncing words clearly relates to reading, it overlaps with speaking.

June Jordan (1985) describes the initial negative responses white and black students had to the African American Vernacular English used in *The Color Purple* (Walker, 1985). Lisa Delpit (2002) catches herself chastising her ten-year-old daughter for using African American Vernacular English. Joan Wynne (2002) describes a group of African American journalism students who claim that they "don't talk right" (p. 205). As Michael Stubbs reminds us, "We hear language through a powerful

Disrupting a Cultural Model Rooted in "Sound It Out"

We do students a great service and engage in political activity when we help families understand how to support a child's literacy learning. Such work is integrated into sustained interactions with families and involves disrupting beliefs about reading and offering strategies to use in addition to sounding words out.

Disrupting Beliefs

- Pam Perkins created a video, *What Is Reading?*, that presents a nine-year-old making many miscues while reading a Leo Leoni book. Viewers also listen to comments about the reading by preservice teachers. In the end, the reader retells the story almost flawlessly, disrupting the idea that all words must be read perfectly for comprehension to occur. (Available from Literacy Possibilities, PO Box 220 Orange, CA 92666-0220.)
- *Whole Language Voices in Teacher Education* (Kathryn Whitmore & Yetta Goodman, Eds., Stenhouse, 1996) contains activities to disrupt the view of reading as the calling of successive sounds. For example, teachers and parents might consider why they can read and answer questions about "nonsense" text such as: "A marlup was poving his kump."
- *Creating Support for Effective Literacy Education* (Lorraine Gillmeister-Krause, Constance Weaver, & Grace

Vento-Zogby, Heinemann, 1997) provides activities to help parents understand the complexity of the reading process and its relation to writing. Examples of flyers that may be copied and sent home are included.

Offering Strategies

- The *Creating Support* book also offers specific strategies to teach families. For example, a bookmark of strategies may be photocopied and sent home with ideas for helping a child who is "stuck," such as check the picture or think about what would make sense.
- *The Reading Detective Club: Solving the Mysteries of Reading* (Debra Goodman, Heinemann, 1999) offers strategies for older readers and includes pages for teachers to send home or to be used in family literacy nights.
- *Beyond Traditional Phonics: Research Discoveries and Reading Instruction* (Margaret Moustafa, Heinemann, 1997) is a text that parents and teachers might read together in a study group. Parent/teacher study groups are a radical form of political activity and may contribute to the critical mass needed to disrupt the cultural model that says "sound it out."

—Richard Meyer

filter of social values and stereotypes" (p. 66). In general, speakers of African American Vernacular English have often been assumed to be lazy, less intelligent, incapable of speaking correctly, or simply incomprehensible (Vaughn-Cooke, 1999). Delpit (2002) explains that speakers of African American Vernacular English are often concerned about the ways others perceive them.

The real issue was our concern about what others would think. We worried about how, after years and years of trying to prove ourselves good enough, we might again be dismissed

as ignorant and unworthy by those in power, by "the white folks." (p. 37)

I suspect that the discomfort expressed by some speakers of African American Vernacular English about oral language is exacerbated when people are asked to read aloud. The emphasis that is often placed on accurate reading may make language variations more apparent and less acceptable to the reader and to others.

CONCLUSIONS

"Sounding out" is a cultural model (Gee, 1999) for reading that is repeatedly voiced by students and

their parents. While this cultural model captures an image of reading that parents and children share, it does not describe what my students actually do when they read. Although children and parents verbalize the importance of "sounding out," it is more often verbalized than actualized by students when solving words in text.

Marie Clay (1991) makes a case for children using a variety of strategies while reading:

The reader uses understandings of what can happen in the world (meaning) and language knowledge

(of words, structures and sound sequences) and several approaches to phonological information from oral and written sources. He mediates the appropriateness of possible responses through attention to visual information. Observation studies reveal a young reader who works very actively on the information in texts. What makes him more able to do this without assistance (independently) is being able to initiate or call up a range of strategies over which he has flexible control. (p. 292)

As Ken Goodman (1993) explains, sounding out words "can only put me in the neighborhood [of the correct word]. Even if I sounded out every letter in sequence, I wouldn't come close, because there's no one-to-one correspondence and because sounds change with the context" (p. 50). Frank Smith explains that "sounding out words" actually interferes with a reader's ability to decode text. According to Smith (2003), people who ascribe to "sounding out" as their primary reading strategy "must be shown that 1) sounding out is a handicap, not a help, to reading; and 2) there is a better alternative" (p. 256).

While the direct teaching of reading strategies may not affect the ways children talk about "sounding out," it is essential that children develop multiple strategies for solving words in text.

- We must continuously work to expand the range of strategies that children possess to solve words and monitor their use of these strategies.
- We must help children to effectively use the letters and sounds in words through strategies that access visual information in ways that are more efficient than "sounding out"; using first letter, making analogies to known words, and checking for visual similarity are more efficient

strategies that children can use to access letter-sound information.

Instructional practices that support the use of multiple cueing sources are already occurring in many classrooms and, as my research demonstrates, many students demonstrate proficiency with reading strategies that extend beyond "sounding out words." The greater challenges reside in addressing a dominant cultural model of reading that offers a simple solution to the complicated task of learning to read. This cultural model has permeated our thinking about reading. Parents tell their children to "sound out words" while reading at home. Teachers enact scripted lessons designed to help children perform left to right visual analysis. National recommendations and policies, in-

The myth of "sounding out words" has infiltrated homes, schools, and the larger society despite its limited usefulness to children.

cluding the National Reading Panel Report and No Child Left Behind, advocate systematic, synthetic phonics. The myth of "sounding out words" has infiltrated homes, schools, and the larger society despite its limited usefulness to children.

Thus the challenge is immense. We must help parents to understand the limitations of "sounding out words" without degrading their genuine efforts to help their children; and we must help them to develop additional strategies for supporting their children with reading. We must also help teachers, administrators, and policy makers to understand the limits of having children "sound out

words" and help them to identify efficient means for helping children use phonic information. Finally, we must address the myth of "sounding out" in public forums, aware that we are challenging an established cultural model of reading and that vestiges of that model will continue to be apparent in the reading talk and behaviors of children and parents.

The easy answer is for me to make recommendations that involve expanding parents' and community members' understandings of reading. Parent workshops, community forums, and informative Web sites are predictable solutions that one might expect to encounter. While these initiatives are potentially effective and certainly worthwhile, I suspect that they will fall short of actuating cultural transformation in the near future. After all, cultural models are developed—and changed—over long periods of time.

A thoughtful solution is two-fold and involves reading educators at all levels. First, the children's demonstrations of alternative reading strategies offer hope that we are already on our way to changing people's understandings about reading. The existence of alternative reading strategies suggests that children know, perhaps at an unconscious level, that "sounding out" is not a particularly effective strategy for reading unknown words.

Second, the theoretical writings of Bakhtin (1981) suggest that the voice of the novice is easily controlled by authority while people with more experience are able to rethink, rephrase, and reconsider to develop their own perspectives on the world. As literacy educators, we must be those people who are engaged in rethinking, rephrasing, and reconsidering the ways children learn to read. We must constantly reflect on our teaching and the strategies our students apply as they

become readers. We must observe children reading and note which strategies are useful and which are discarded. As we teach young readers, we must actively challenge the myth of "sounding out," both directly and by modeling alternative word-solving strategies.

Years from now, if we are successful, our former students will become parents who help their children to develop flexible and efficient word-solving strategies, and when they or their children enter our undergraduate and graduate programs, they will bring expanded notions of word solving. I conclude with an account written by a graduate student; it is a strong testament to the importance of recognizing the limits of "sounding out words":

I remember my first experience in a classroom; it was first grade. It was horrible for me personally because I did not know what to do when teaching a struggling reader. I had forgotten the phonics rules since they were pure habit at that point. When I had a struggling reader on my lap and he/she would look at me for assistance while struggling with a difficult or unfamiliar word, the only thing I could say was "sound it out." I had no idea how to help that student actually sound out the word, so I ended up getting frustrated not with that student, but with myself, and giving them the correct sounds or even the word.

She reported that "sounding out" "is not being used as a technique, but an excuse when teachers do not have any other strategy up their sleeve to help the struggling reader." Let us be teachers who challenge

the myth of "sounding out" and provide our students with a range of useful word-solving strategies.

References

- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). Discourse in the novel. In M. Holquist (Ed.), *The dialogic imagination: Four essays by M. M. Bakhtin* (pp. 259–422). Austin, TX: University of Texas.
- Beaver, J. (1997). *Developmental reading assessment*. Parsippany, NJ: Celebration.
- Burke, C. (1987). Reading interview. In L. K. Rhodes (Ed.), *Literacy assessment: A handbook of instruments* (pp. 6–14). Katonah, NY: Richard Owen.
- Clay, M. (1991). *Becoming literate: The construction of inner control*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Clay, M. (2001). *Change over time in children's literacy development*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Compton-Lilly, C. (2003). *Reading families: The literate lives of urban children*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Compton-Lilly, C. (2004). *Confronting racism, poverty, and power: Classroom strategies to change the world*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Delpit, L. (2002). No kinda sense. In L. Delpit & J. K. Dowdy (Eds.), *The skin that we speak: Thoughts on language and culture in the classroom* (pp. 31–48). New York: The New Press.
- Ekwall, E., & Shanker, J. (1993). *Ekwall/Shanker reading inventory* (3rd ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Fountas, I., & Pinnell, G. S. (1996). *Guided reading: Good first teaching for all children*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Gee, J. (1999). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method*. New York: Routledge.
- Goodman, K. (1993). *Phonics facts*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Jordan, J. (1985). Nobody mean more to me than you and the future life of Willie Jordan. In *On call: Political essays* (pp. 123–139). Boston: South End Press.
- National Reading Panel. (2000). *Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction*. (NIH Publication No. 00–4769). Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.
- Reid, J. F. (1966). Learning to think about reading. *Educational Researcher*, 9, 56–63.
- Reutzel, D. R., & Sabey, B. (1996). Teacher beliefs and children's concepts about reading: Are they related? *Reading Research and Instruction*, 35, 323–342.
- Smith, F. (2003). The just so story—Obvious but false. *Language Arts*, 80, 256–258.
- Stubbs, M. (2002). Some basic sociolinguistic concepts. In L. Delpit & J. K. Dowdy (Eds.), *The skin that we speak: Thoughts on language and culture in the classroom* (pp. 63–85). New York: The New Press.
- Vaughn-Cooke, A. (1999). Lessons learned from the Ebonics controversy—Implications for language assessment. In C. T. Adger, D. Christian, & O. Taylor (Eds.), *Making the connection: Language and academic achievement among African American students* (pp. 137–168). McHenry, IL: Center for Applied Linguistics and Delta Systems.
- Walker, A. (1985). *The color purple*. New York: Pocket Books.
- Wynne, J. (2002). "We don't talk right. You ask him." In L. Delpit & J. K. Dowdy (Eds.), *The skin that we speak: Thoughts on language and culture in the classroom* (pp. 203–219). New York: The New Press.

Author Biography

Catherine Compton-Lilly is a visiting assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin at Madison.